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Hunt Reveals How Plumbers Bungled

By JOHN BARKHAM
"UNDERCOVER." Memoirs of an American Secret Agent, by E. Howard Hunt. Putnam. 329 pages. \$8.95.)

Though Watergate is behind us (we hope), readers had better brace themselves for the flood of memoirs, histories, analyses, psycho-exegeses and other commentaries due to overwhelm us in coming months. "The Palace Guard," by Dan Rather and Gary Paul Gates, is already out, and here now is a memoir by one of the White House "Plumbers" unit, E. Howard Hunt, a former CIA agent and sometime novelist of espionage and intrigue.

Hunt was involved in the Watergate break-in, for which he received a lengthy prison term. He is now out on appeal and has used his freedom to dictate this memoir. There are few real surprises in the book, but it does provide an insider's view of bungled "Plumber" operations. There are times when it reads like a Marx Brothers movie with lines to match. How much of it is provable fact only Hunt knows.

Here, for example, is a taste of the dialogue which followed the original break-in at the office of Dr. Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, Dr. Lewis Fielding, in California. "Barker said, 'Eduardo, there was nothing there.' I stared at him. 'Nothing?' He shook his head. 'You're absolutely sure?' Liddy asked. Barker nodded, as did Martinez and De Diego. They had pulled off their wigs. 'Well,' I said, 'I guess it's time for champagne.'"

Serving His Country

Not all of it is funny. Most of the book can be described as a catalogue of ineptitude — the ineptitude of grown men playing boys' games. One thinks of Hunt donning a wig and conducting two unsatisfactory interrogations of HITT's

Dita Beard in a Denver hospital (she had almost nothing to say), the novelistic plotting and disguises in which the "Plumbers" cloaked their operations. Members would call each other from public phone booths, would fly and register in motels under assumed names, would transmit directives through trusted intermediaries, and more, much more.

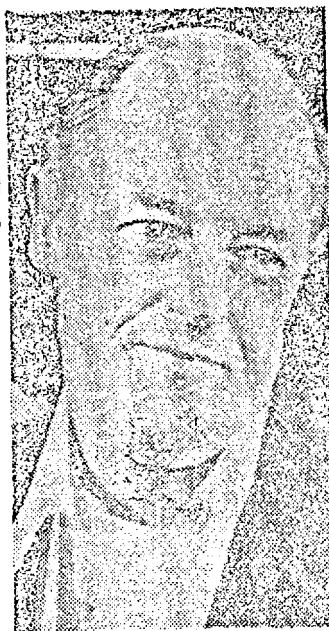
The humor in all this is unconscious so far as Hunt is concerned. To him it was all deadly serious in the service of his country. Bear in mind always that he is an experienced writer of thriller novels accustomed of spinning cloak-and-dagger plots of paperbacks. He began writing these while still with the CIA, where he submitted his first manuscripts for approval until he learned that a CIA secretary had lost some of his proofs while reading the book. One of his series of novels was about a hero named "Peter Ward," conceived as an American counterpart to James Bond. Eight "Peter Ward" adventures were published.

Left Out in Cold

So intrigue comes naturally to E. Howard Hunt. You will note novelistic touches all through this memoir — in the dialogue, in the self-justification, in the characterization of Daniel Ellsberg, who had released the Pentagon Papers to the Press. ("Ellsberg had attended Cambridge University in England, historically a fertile hunting ground for Soviet recruiters," a Hunt remark reminiscent of the late Senator McCarthy's animadversions against Harvard in the fifties). To be fair to Hunt, he also investigated Barry Goldwater in 1964 at the request of the Johnson administration, though he personally was a "vocal Goldwater partisan." Hunt was an undercover agent who carried out his work.

He writes feelingly of the harsh sentences imposed on

the "Plumbers," on conditions in the jails where he did time, and, most of all, on the death of his wife, killed in an air crash. He is bitter that his offer in October 1972 to plea-bargain by telling all in return for a recommended suspended sentence was rejected by the assistant U.S. attorney. He is bitter, too, against ex-President Nixon, "the man I had believed in for so many



E. Howard Hunt

years, who turned out to be indecisive, petty, and obsessed with self-preservation."

As for his own fate, Hunt — to the surprise of no one — turns to a passage in a thriller by Eric Ambler: "He must be discredited and destroyed as a man, so that he may safely be dealt with as a criminal." In short, E. Howard Hunt regards himself as a spy left out in the cold.

P-Barkham, John
CIA-104 Hunt, Howard
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